

ADYAR PAMPHLETS

No. 160

A Sketch of Theosophy

*A lecture delivered at Hindhead, Surrey,
on July 6, 1911.*

BY

ANNIE BESANT

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A SKETCH OF THEOSOPHY

SOMETIMES, in a very large subject, people are apt to float about a little vaguely. Now Theosophy is a very large subject, and very much talked about; but constantly, if you speak to anyone about it, you find that their ideas are exceedingly vague. And I thought, perhaps, this afternoon I could do no better service with regard to the subject than to try to give you certain definite points, so that you might at your leisure, if you wish, take those as fixed points around which you might study, realising each in its own place, and then following the broad line of study that attracts you most by your temperament, by your own line of thinking.

Now there are very many ways in which such a subject can be divided, and I am going to take an exceedingly natural division: the way in which any one of you may regard yourself, the natural divisions of yourself; and then show you one or two of the Theosophical teachings belonging especially to each of these divisions.

For a moment, thinking of yourself, you evidently have a body. On that no discussion can arise. Now, related to the body, to the working of

consciousness in the body, is the great branch of human thought that we call Science, Science which observes through the senses, classifies its observations and reasons upon them through the brain ; there you have a great department of human thought which, by its method of working, is inevitably connected with our physical plane. The senses are its means of observation, the consciousness working in the brain is its instrument for classifying, arranging, all the phenomena that it observes.

Then you find, still looking at yourself, that after the body comes your emotional nature, the nature by which you feel, which is connected with pleasure and pain, connected with desires, the things you like and dislike, and then with love, the feeling for beauty—everything which in your ordinary thought you class as emotional. There, again, is a great department of human thought, and in that there are two subdivisions : one, the question of conduct, of virtues and vices, which are really only emotions made general and permanent instead of being special and fleeting ; thus Morality distinctly links itself on to our emotional nature. Then, in addition, you have the field of Art, where the emotion of Beauty finds its natural expression. The emotional, then, will be a second department of Nature with which we shall have to deal in Theosophy.

Going beyond the emotions you find the mind, and thought obviously is connected with philosophy,

that which seeks to answer the problems of life in a way which satisfies the reason.

And lastly there is something behind all these, more inner, or higher, than the three I have mentioned—the spiritual nature, that which finds its natural expression in Religion, that which is ever seeking after God, and finds in religious thought that which meets its aspirations, and shows the road which leads to the realisation of the Divine.

Now that is a fairly simple and obvious division of your own nature; the body, the emotions, the mind, the Spirit. And yet it is a division which is practically inclusive. It takes in the whole of your nature. You might, indeed, subdivide each of these again; but we may ignore the subdivisions for our purpose, and content ourselves with that simple division of man.

Now, in all these departments of human thought, Theosophy has something to say. It has something to say about Religion, about the science of Religion, and about the various forms of thought which express the same fundamental religious truths. It is also a Philosophy answering the problems of life to the reason. It has a very clear idea of the way in which Morality may be rendered compelling, and may be seen as part of the great law of the Universe which cannot be disregarded save at the peril of the man who does disregard it. And then it also has a good

deal to say as to Science. Thus it covers the whole field of human thought, and puts forward certain great ideas in each of these fields, worthy, I think, of your consideration, as supplying many very suggestive ideas to illuminate matters which are often puzzling and obscure.

First, then, as to Religion. What has Theosophy to say on this question? Fundamentally, it declares the capacity of man to know God. I do not mean belief, nor speculation; I mean knowledge; and by knowledge of God I mean knowledge as definite, as real and as experimental as the Science of our time is in relation to the physical world. And for the same reason: man is able to know the physical world because he has in his body senses which enable him to answer to impressions coming from outside. That is the condition of knowledge, that you can answer from within yourself to anything which is outside you, and unless you are able thus to answer, it is not to you an object of knowledge. It may be a matter of belief, or speculation; but nothing is an object of knowledge to you unless you yourself are able to cognise it, unless you have the means of knowledge within yourself. Now the whole contention of those who have declared that man could not *know* God has been that man had no faculties adapted to gain the knowledge. All those during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, who called themselves Agnostics, based their position on the

contention that man could know the physical world, for he had senses to observe it; he could know the intellectual world, for he had reason, which he could utilise. But beyond the senses and the reason, it was contended, man had no faculties whereby knowledge could be obtained; and the very word Agnostic, "without knowledge," implies that that great scheme of knowledge known in the old days as the Gnosis was entirely beyond the reach of the faculties of man.

Now Theosophy takes up exactly the opposite position, declaring that man in his very nature is such that he is capable of direct knowledge of God; that man in his innermost essence is a spiritual being, and that, being himself Spirit, he can know the Universal Spirit whence he comes. Because he is fundamentally spiritual, therefore, he has within himself capacities for gaining knowledge of the spiritual. Hence man, as Spirit, can know the Universal Spirit, being able to respond to impressions that come from that Spirit, and by responding, to know. And that is the very essence of the idea of Theosophy, that view of man as Spirit, dwelling in material envelopes certainly, but fundamentally a spiritual being, and therefore capable of immediate contact with the great spiritual realities. Theosophy, putting forward that view of human nature, is perfectly and essentially religious.

In the second place, it claims to be the basis and common truth of all the great religions of the

world, and therefore it does not identify itself with any special form of religion. It advises people always to remain in the religion to which they belong, to deepen it, broaden it, spiritualise it. For, in each of the great religions, from the standpoint of the student of religions, the same great spiritual truths exist, put into the particular form most suitable for the time at which the religion was given, most fitted to develop the civilisation at whose root that particular religion lay. Hence you find Theosophists of every Faith, and that which distinguishes them is that they hold these great common truths as belonging to all religions, but follow different forms, different ceremonies, different rites, according to the special religion to which they belong. Now these common truths are not very numerous, but they are literally "common," belonging to every great religion of the world, living or dead; and the only question which can arise respecting these is as to the source of these common truths, not as to the fact of their existence. Every one who has studied the subject, every one who knows anything about the great religions of the world, cannot but be aware that their fundamental truths are common to them, but in different shapes, conveyed in different forms of words and ceremonies. Theosophy, dealing with the religions of the world, accepts these few great fundamental truths which all religions have in common, which have been believed in all the ages

of the world's history, and puts them apart from local rites and customs, marking them as the treasures of the great Faiths of the world, showing all Faiths as branches from a single tree.

In the religious or spiritual field, then, these two things are the ideas you ought to grasp: first, the idea that man as a spiritual being can know God, and develop the Divine within himself; and secondly, that in each of the religions of the world there is a body of truths common to all the religions and those truths are called Theosophy. So that Theosophy in every country is the servant of the religions of the country, endeavouring in every way possible to be of help and use, and always bringing out these essential truths, as those that are most important to the particular religion, and that enable it to link itself with other religions of the present as well as with great religions of the past.

When from the spiritual side we pass on to the philosophical, or Reason side—which embraces all the profound questions of existence—we see Theosophy to be Idealistic, as against all the Materialistic schools. We cannot touch on all the questions, but there are two most important teachings which Theosophy especially presses on the attention of the western world. I say “especially of the western world,” because in the East these teachings are common property, and they are fortunately becoming more and more common in the West. In

fact, they have only dropped out of the great Christian religion during the last thousand years, and are now very quickly coming again to the front. One of these is called the doctrine of Reincarnation; the other, the doctrine of Karma, or the Law of Action and Re-action. Now both of these deal with two of the great problems which are continually occupying the minds of thoughtful people. How do we find such immense differences between man and man? How comes it that one man is to all intents and purposes a fool, while another is a genius? What is the explanation of this vast gulf dividing one human being from another, so that you may have one child born a congenital criminal, while another may be born a saint? What explanation can we find which satisfies the natural demand of human thought for Justice, leaving entirely aside for the moment the question of Love and Compassion? You know how often people, when they are dealing with economic and political questions, talk about "equality of opportunity," as a just demand. That is a phrase you continually hear in the mouth of people, who desire to bring about immense social changes. They admit that men are not equal in capacity, but at least, they say, we ought to give them equality of opportunity. Now the natural answer of a thoughtful person to that demand is: It is not so much a question of equality of opportunity, as of capacity to take the

opportunity when it comes. Plenty of opportunities come in one's way, but the power to grasp an opportunity, the power to use it, the power to turn it to some really useful and beneficial purpose, that is not equal, and nothing you can do, even if you could give equality of opportunity, will destroy the radical difference between the man who lacks the capacity to grasp, and the man who not only can grasp the opportunity when it comes, but make it, if it does not present itself to him. There lies the real crux of this great problem. It may be all very well for a number of you who are placed in fairly comfortable circumstances, with reasonable abilities, fair qualifications, education, and so on. People never ask themselves: "What have I done to deserve all this?" But they ask quickly enough if any trouble comes along: "What have I done that I should suffer in this way?" That is quite natural, quite right. Man fundamentally, in his spiritual nature, is a happy being, for God is Bliss, and man's divine nature is blissful; hence, when there is anything that frustrates happiness, man naturally rises up and indignantly asks: Why? Whereas, when happiness comes he takes it naturally, as that which ought to be expected in a reasonable world. But this difference of capacity is the thing which weighs on the hearts of those who have seen the sadder side of human life.

Now the doctrine of reincarnation gives us a rational explanation of the whole of that. It is

not only that it is a doctrine, as Max Müller said, which all the greatest minds of our race have accepted, and which therefore might be presumed to be essentially rational; but it is a doctrine that appeals to the reason the moment it is stated. Now what does reincarnation mean? It means that each person, being fundamentally a spiritual being, clothes himself in matter in order that he may gain knowledge through it in the world to which that matter belongs. So that we find man surrounded with various kinds of matter, making up his material envelope, which put him into touch with different worlds, according to the stage of evolution which that particular man has reached. Now, when a man begins his human life, he begins in the lowest possible condition, the condition of ignorance, coming into a world which he does not know, surrounded by the blinding matter which he will have gradually to shape into a form in which he may be able to become acquainted with the outer world, and so to gain knowledge. At that point we all start alike. But we do not all start at the same time. In successive waves of living spiritual beings we come into this world. A little experience is gathered in the first human life. Passing out of life through the gate of death, that experience brings us sorrow if the experience is of the ignoring of law, happiness if the experience is that of working in accord with the law, and of course in

every case the experience is mixed. In the intermediate world into which we pass after death, we meet the results of the evil experiences of this life, and work them out and register them in consciousness. Passing on then into the heaven-world, we reap all good experiences which here we have gathered, and change that experience into faculty. So that when we return again for another gathering of experience in the physical world, we bring with us the faculties built out of the experience of the past, and the tendency to think a thing right or wrong, which we call Conscience—very limited in its early days, but with each life becoming fuller, clearer, and more accurate, the record of the experiences of suffering which we have met with in the ignoring of the laws amid which we have lived. And so, from life to life, with each return, we gain something by the experience of the past, climbing step by step up the great ladder of evolution by this continual assimilation of experience and its transmutation into faculty and conscience. Hence, step by step, we grow out of the brute into the human being; and then, higher still, into the Divine Man, the Perfect Man, which is the end of the great cycle of reincarnation. To learn everything that the earth has to teach, to develop all the possibilities infolded in the germ of divinity within us, to continue in that cycle of life until at last all its lessons have been learned, and then

to go forward, a Divine Man, for the helping of younger humanities, for the helping of later worlds, each world giving out its quota of men made perfect for the work of the great and infinite Universe—that is what reincarnation means.

Now, in the course of these experiences we always have a choice as to whether a little experience will satisfy us, or whether we demand more and more before we are willing to learn the lesson. That which is called "sin" in all theologies is the deliberate choice of the lower after we have learned to distinguish the lower from the higher. There is no sin for the man who does not know the higher. The savage does not sin, when he does what we call evil. He is unmoral, he has not yet reaped the experience which has enabled him to distinguish. But when we have learned the difference, then, if for a time we choose the lower when the higher is available, if we tend to descend to the brute instead of rising to the God, then it is we "sin". And what we call remorse is the protest of the spiritual nature, when the matter which it is appropriating for its own purposes drags it downward, despite the knowledge gained that the higher possibility is within its reach.

And so you find in this teaching of reincarnation that you have before you all possibility of unfoldment, and no injustice anywhere; that the lowest savage is only what we were in the past, that to what we are now he will inevitably climb; that

the most splendid saint was once as you and I now are, and that in ages to come we shall have climbed to his position. Differences of age there are between us, like the older and younger members of a family; but all are treading the same road, growing out of the brute into realised divinity. That is the Path along which mankind is treading, and that is the splendid hope which cheers us at every stage of the long journey.

And side by side with that comes the doctrine that Law is Law, as much in the mental and emotional worlds as in the physical; that we can no more escape the law of action and reaction in the worlds of thought and feeling, than we can escape it in the physical world; that that changeless Law which is the expression of the Divine Nature is to be learned, and that it is our wisdom, having learned it, to obey; that if we refuse to obey, we cannot break a law of Nature, but we can fling ourselves against it and bruise ourselves in the flinging. And as we learn to understand this law, as we learn its application to every phase of human life, we gain exactly that same power over our own nature that the scientific man gains over external nature when he has gained a knowledge of its laws. The scientific man who knows the law is able to use the forces of Nature and to bend them to his own purposes. As long as he is ignorant, he is helpless and in danger: when he understands, the law does not bind him, but

enables him to do that which he wills to do. That is true of all laws of Nature. They are not commands, but conditions of fulfilment. Hence, when we know these laws as they affect our own nature, especially the thought and desire nature, we learn then to utilise those great forces for the building of our own character; we learn how, with scientific certainty, we can build up virtue and eradicate vice; and that there is no more chance, no more accident, in these obscurer regions of our nature, than there is chance or accident in the outer world where the rule of law is everywhere admitted. Hence in these two great teachings of reincarnation as method of evolution, and of law as means of evolution, with those as the foundation of our philosophy, we are able to guide and shape our lives. We find them answering these great problems to which I alluded. We find that the knowledge of them puts power into our hands, and makes us masters of our future.

Pass from the realm of thought to the realm of the emotions. I divided that into two: Morality and Art. Now, as regards morality, we hardly find, as yet, here in the West that people realise the fact that there is a Science of Morality, as clear, as definite, and as experimental, as any one of the physical sciences. You have moral precepts. Your religion gives them to you. But the reason for the precepts, the facts which underlie the enunciation of certain great moral laws, these are

points which are not at present understood as they ought to be; so that very often a moral precept loses its compelling power because it does not immediately recommend itself to the reason, and no answer is given as to why that precept is proclaimed. Let me take one as an example: "Do good to those who hate you." Now, why should you? That is a question which is very often asked. One day, I was talking with a man who was not religious, and when I quoted that precept to him, his retort was: "Why should I? Why should I do good to a man who does harm to me? Shall I not encourage him to do it another time?" He was not willing to take it as the statement of the great Teachers of the world. He demanded a reason for obedience. Now the reason is profoundly simple, although it is not so very often given.

Let me remind you that you are made up of Spirit and matter. In Spirit, which expresses itself as thought, you get changes of consciousness continually going on. In the matter which is connected with your consciousness, you get a series of vibrations, each one of which answers to a change in your consciousness. You cannot speak of vibrations of consciousness, only changes in it, but each of these changes is accompanied by a quite definite vibration in matter. Suppose, then, you have a feeling of anger. That feeling of anger in you will assert itself in the matter connected with you by violent vibrations. Those vibrations in you tend to stir

up in the body of any person with whom you meet similar vibrations ; and so you have two sets of similar vibrations increasing each other as they strike against each other continually. Just as a series of taps given regularly to a pendulum makes its swing larger and larger, so do these material vibrations in the two people increase and strengthen the angry emotions in each other. That which stirs up feeling in the second strikes back against the first, and so you get increasing anger, until violent passion breaks out and may even lead to crime. Try that—I said it was an experimental science. Watch your own feeling when you come across a person in a bad temper, and you will find that though you were quite good-tempered a moment before, you will become conscious of a feeling of irritation which will, if unchecked, soon pass into bad temper. It is the result of the vibrations playing upon you, and the vibrations caused in yourself, producing the change in consciousness that you know as anger. How is that to be put an end to when two people meet, so that one angry person may not provoke another, and bring about a violent quarrel ? By the second person setting up the opposite emotion, which will be accompanied by a series of vibrations exactly contrary to the vibrations of anger, and so will tend gradually to soothe them instead of intensifying them. Just as by two carefully calculated sounds you can make silence, so you can silence the vibrations of anger

in another by sending against him a current of good-will.

Now there is the simple scientific explanation of the moral precept. The Great Teacher said: "Return good for evil;" but He was expressing in that a fundamental law in Nature: that you can only stop an evil by the opposite good, and not by meeting it with a thing of its own nature, a repetition of itself. Exactly along the same lines the Lord Buddha said: "Hatred ceaseth not by hatred at any time, hatred ceaseth by Love;" and the same reason underlies it. Send out the love vibrations against the vibrations of hatred, and the hatred dies away into peace. When you realise that, you see the meaning of the law. It is completely rational. It is the right way to meet any wrong emotion in another. In the case of the man I spoke of, the moment I told him that as a scientific fact, he accepted it. It appealed to reason, by showing him the natural facts underlying the moral law. And to know that that is a law, to know that this influence we have upon each other is an influence we can use for good or evil; that we can extinguish anger or intensify it, and that on us lies the responsibility, when we meet those who do not know how to rule their emotions, of supplying the emotion which will hinder the bad and strengthen the good; this is one of the valuable facts in the Science of Morality that every one should know, first taking

the statement, and then experimenting with it, and finding out that the law works as laws of Nature always work, invariably and changelessly.

And there is another point of enormous importance with regard to Morality. A virtue is nothing more than a good emotion rationalised, made permanent and made universal. Look at that for a moment and see if it is true. Where you love a person, you will always seek to do him good. You will always be ready to sacrifice your own pleasure for the helping of that person. You will be continually on the look-out for opportunities of service to the object of your love. But supposing that you meet a person whom you do not like, or to whom you are indifferent, your attitude to that person is quite other. You are not on the look-out for opportunities of service, you are not willing to deny yourself for him. You remain indifferent, because love is not there. But how, if you change the emotion of love into the virtue of benevolence? if, instead of making it special to the one you love, you make it universal to all with whom you come in contact? if, instead of love being the passing emotion, it becomes the permanent mode of your mind towards the outer world, then the love emotion has changed into the virtue of benevolence. It is made universal, it is made permanent, and you have formed a definite part of your character instead of being moved by the passing emotion of love. It is because all virtues

have their roots in love, rationalised, made permanent and universal, that you have that true statement in the teaching of the Apostle, that "Love is the fulfilling of the law." You do without law, by love, all that the law demands. As you realise that, and feel to every child as you would feel to your own, are as willing to help anyone in trouble as you would be to help your brother or sister, then you have made the splendid transmutation of a personal emotion into a universal virtue, and you realise why love lies at the root of all virtues, and why its opposite, hate, is the root of all vice, that disintegrates and destroys. And so you rationalise your emotions, you understand them, you use them, you try to transmute them into the permanent form of virtues. And when you understand a little further, that your thought has the power to create in you the virtues that you admire, then you are fully equipped for the building of character. By thought you create, building up the character deliberately, consciously, knowing exactly what you are doing; because, instead of the mere haphazard goodness which so many show out or aspire after, you have knowledge underlying your aspirations and know how to create.

In the realm of Art, Theosophy gives the inspiration which is wanted for all true Art. Now Art, in our modern days, has become far too imitative. It reproduces natural objects. And

you call a man an artist who reproduces very exquisitely and truly. But that is only the alphabet of Art. The artist is not the man who reproduces but the man who creates. Has it ever struck you to ask: What is natural Beauty? And have you thought that all the beautiful objects round you are divine thoughts materialised into objects, and shaped and moulded into those objects by the work of those tiny artificers whom we sometimes call Nature-Spirits, the lowest orders of the angelic hosts, who are ever turning the divine thoughts into objects of beauty? Now man is higher in intelligence than these workers in Nature. He ought to see more of the divine thought in all natural beauty than that lower type of intelligence which fashioned the object; and the artist is the man who can see more of the divine thought than is expressed in the material object, and gives out to the world that surplusage of beauty which the moulding of the object has not succeeded in giving. The great creative artists are those who are able to come into touch with the Divine Mind, to reproduce more beauty in form than the more limited intelligences could do; those who see beneath the veil which only gives part of the Divine Beauty, drawing more of it out and thus transfiguring the object, making what is called the real into the ideal, the ideal being far higher and truer than the real, because it is nearer to the Divine Artist who thought. And so, along all lines

of Art, Theosophy, in bringing a new inspiration, makes the possibility of a greater and a higher Art. Art always flowers out of spiritual ideals, and it is the dullness of those ideals in our days that has made Art more a copy than a creation. With the new thrill of life which is passing through the world, with the more mystical view which is gradually replacing the more literal, with all of that which is the Theosophical element in Religion, we may look for the birth of a new Art, even loftier and greater than the splendid Art of the past.

And lastly, in the realm of the physical world, Theosophy brings a new area under scientific observation. Science has been observing the physical world, and is now gradually but quite definitely, leaving the visible world for the invisible, and groping dimly into the world of ether and of force, neither of which is visible to the physical eye. Notice Science to-day and you will find it studying Force far more than Matter. And Theosophy brings to Science new apparatus. Not apparatus outside, where almost the limit of delicacy has been reached, but apparatus in the unfolding powers of the man himself, that can now be quickened in their evolution, man having reached a point where these powers are on the very verge, as it were, of bursting out from bud into flower. Theosophy can bring to the man of science that finer apparatus of the inner sight, the keener,

subtler sight that belongs to the higher bodies, in addition to that which belongs to the physical body; so that the scientist may carry on his observations into worlds which at present are invisible and intangible, and by that means make his science a science of all the worlds, and not only of the physical, working with a sight as sure and certain in the subtler worlds as he is already able to do in the denser world of physical matter. For, along the lines of Theosophical science, with the development of these higher faculties and senses, the worlds on the other side of death become as cognisable to the higher senses as the physical world is to the physical senses, no longer a matter of theory or speculation, or hope, but of observation; for the phenomena of these worlds are just as susceptible of observation as the phenomena of this. It is only a question of developing the touch with them. Along that line there open up innumerable subjects for study, of profound interest to every thoughtful and educated person—new fields, as it were, for observation, new worlds which come within our reach. And that Cosmic Consciousness, of which Frederick Myers rather vaguely spoke, is a reality which is within our reach to-day. By a perfect science of the higher consciousness, man may gradually unfold the faculties and raise the centre of his consciousness higher and higher. Along these lines Science may

make new investigations, new research, and vast fields open up before it to be conquered, as the physical field is already conquered by man.

So that in each of these four great departments of thought, Theosophy comes to offer you knowledge, to show you the means of gaining the knowledge, and to point out to you the much vaster fields which lie before humanity than those which for the most part are recognised to-day. If you will take those points I have put to you: in Religion the knowledge of God and the study of the truths which are common to all religions; in Philosophy, the study of reincarnation as the method of evolution, and of the law of action and re-action in the mental and moral worlds as well as in the physical; if, in the field of the emotions, you will study the Science of Morality along the lines I have suggested, and then seek, in developing the emotion of Beauty, to understand the real object of all true Art; if, in the physical world, looking at physical Science, you realise that what has been done here may be done in worlds of subtler matter by similar means, by the evolution of a higher consciousness, part of the same consciousness that you use here; then, when you hear the word Theosophy, you will realise a little more distinctly, I think, the kind of knowledge that this is bringing within your reach; you will understand that it is a knowledge to which, if you would master it, you must give

the same time, the same study, the same efforts, as you would give to the mastery of an ordinary science, and, indeed, much more, remembering that this science is a synthesis of life, dealing with every department of human thought and of human achievement. Therefore you must not expect to do more than just grasp some points in it by listening to a brief hour's lecture. But here, more than in any other field, the study rewards the student. Just in proportion to the thought, the energy, the faculty, that you bring to bear upon it will be the reward that, in its turn, it will give to you. It is possible that hearing of it even thus briefly, some of you may be stimulated into study, and that the spoken words may prove the impulse to individual thought and research ; Theosophy is full of the greatest possibilities of happiness, and gives to each one of us that which to some of us seems to be the most priceless of gifts : it renders life intelligible, and it brightens it with an eternal Hope.